



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement of Response to ODIHR

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Douglas A. Davidson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 30, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me begin by thanking Mr. Wagenseil for his excellent work and dedication as acting director and expressing our joy of his continued presence in position as Deputy Director. We look forward to working with him closely in the future.

I would also like to say a word of thanks to Mr. Balian. As the head of the Election Section at ODIHR, he has worked tirelessly to promote elections that meet OSCE standards. We are sorry to see him go, and wish him the best of luck in the future.

And then of course, I would like to join the chair in welcoming Ambassador Strohal to the PC today and congratulating him on his appointment as Director of ODIHR. Ambassador Strohal will have our full support in implementing ODIHR's busy agenda.

That busy agenda includes many election observation missions. The United States plans to play its part in seconding a number of observers throughout this year. We encourage others to do the same.

In accordance with the PC decision and Ministerial Council decisions on elections adopted in Porto, ODIHR is encouraged to develop a practical guide to democratic elections best practices that includes a compilation of existing commitments and standards that the Permanent Council can take into account as it considers the need to elaborate new commitments. The United States will follow this process closely.

Also on the issue of elections, as we said at last week's meeting of the Permanent Council, we remain concerned about the President of Kyrgyzstan's planned constitutional referendum scheduled for the 2nd of February. The new draft does not appear to us to take into account many of the views of the Constitutional Court, and thereby seriously undermines this broadly representative process, and contains a number of provisions that fall short of international standards and that would further concentrate power in the presidency and weaken the role of civil society. We are concerned that there is insufficient time to review the draft, especially given almost daily changes to it. And like ODIHR, we call on Kyrgyz authorities to postpone the referendum and to work with appropriate ODIHR and Venice Commission authorities to review the proposal.

Mr. Chairman, in addition to the many election-related activities, the OSCE this year has a heavy schedule of human dimension meetings.

We are pleased to be able to join consensus on the decisions for the topics of the ODIHR Seminar, and the second week of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. We hope only that through the annotated agendas of these meetings, the topics will be further focused.

We also expect that the Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings will discuss torture, religious freedom, and Roma/Sinti.

On the issue of torture, we fully support ODIHR's plans to expand the anti-Torture Panel of Experts. Their expertise will be needed for the Supplementary Meeting. And we also support ODIHR's plans to go to Uzbekistan to follow-up on a number of torture related issues. We too would appreciate a full investigation into the deaths of Mr. Avazov and Mr. Alimov, as we already have said a number of times before.

On the issue of religious freedom, a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on this topic, especially one that focuses on registration issues, is especially important as attacks on many different religious groups continue.

The U.S. must register its strong concern for the January 24 attack in Tbilisi, by a mob led by defrocked Orthodox priest Basili Mkalavishvili, on an ecumenical service organized by the Baptist church and including clergy from the Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Georgian Orthodox, and Evangelical Baptist churches.

The OSCE cannot accept that rights of persons to worship freely be impinged. We strongly urge the Government of Georgia to take decisive action, including punishment of those who engage in violence, to confront the issue of the deteriorating religious freedom situation there.

The U.S. also anticipates implementing the Porto Ministerial Decision on Tolerance and Non-discrimination. We are eager to advance this work in a special conference on anti-Semitism. We recognize that discrimination against other ethnic and religious groups must also be addressed, and we support OSCE work in this regard.

Other issues that Ambassador Strohal will need to focus on upon assumption of his duties include whether the circumstances surrounding the proposed referendum in Chechnya are suitable for ODIHR involvement.

We are pleased that ODIHR will be continuing its training sessions on Human Rights for Judicial and Legal Practitioners, Local Administrators and Human Rights Workers in the Chechen Republic, with the next session taking place from February 3-8.

And we reiterate our regret at the closing of the Assistance Group in Chechnya. On the other hand we are encouraged by Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov's announcement of Russia's willingness to work with ODIHR and other OSCE institutions on issues regarding Chechnya.

Finally, we also welcome the release from prison of Russian journalist Grigoriy Pasko, who was imprisoned for nearly three years on espionage charges related to his reporting on serious environmental pollution problems. We take his release as a reaffirmation of Russian support for the basic right to freedom of expression.

I thank you.